Hounded

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Summary

They were going to kill him. Tim Drake knew this in the fiberglass shards of his bones. He would run as far as he could, but it wouldn't be far enough. They would find him. They would catch him. And they would kill him.

——Can be read as a standalone——

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

They were going to kill him. Tim Drake knew this in the fiberglass shards of his bones. He would run as far as he could, but it wouldn't be far enough. They would find him. They would catch him. And they would kill him.

Bruce, I'm so sorry.

Tim clutched his broken arm to his chest and choked back a sob as he staggered through the maze of crates. No noise. Noise was a tell. Noise was death, faster, sooner. If he could find a place to hide, maybe, *maybe* he would live. He was so stupid for getting cut off and isolated, without backup or ally. But if he could just hide, maybe he could stay alive long enough to be found.

The men chasing him weren't silent. They were loud, so loud, the baying of hounds on the trail of a limping fox. Tim flinched from the shouts, knowing he was being hounded and herded, but unable to escape. He forced himself to move faster, stumbling over his own heavy feet, ignoring the flare of pain in his leg, one gloved hand pressed to the wall of crates to keep himself upright.

He didn't see the fist before it hit him, knuckles hitting the side of his head with a crack. Tim went down, twisting even as he did to keep from landing on his arm. His skull was full of bees, humming so loud he could barely hear the shouts growing louder or the triumphant laugh of the man standing over him.

A boot drove into his ribs. Tim curled and rolled with a gasp, and the second strike caught him only as a glancing blow. It didn't matter. He was caught between the wall of crates and his attacker. The next blow would land, and the next, and the next. Tim was glad, perversely, that the jammer was still working and no one would be able to hear what was coming.

He heard the man over him shout again, a call to his pack, and the unmistakable *chu-chck* of a handgun being cocked. Oh. Good. It would be quick, then.

BANG!

Even braced, Tim still jerked spasmodically at the too-close roar of the gunshot. It took him too long to separate the bright, shocking scream of pain in his jostled arm from the screaming elsewhere and the lack of bullet wound-related pain generally.

He… wasn't… shot? He wasn't dead. Still fever-hot with adrenaline, Tim lifted his head in time to see a man round the far end of the wall of crates, face slick with sweat and fear. He was shouting, gesturing to Tim and the gunman standing over him as he ran toward them. As Tim watched, another shot rang out, and the man fell, screaming, his kneecap a mess of pulp and exposed bone.

"Црвена Кацига," the gunman breathed, just loud enough for Tim to hear. A horrible chill ran up Tim's spine.

Red Hood.

He wouldn't die quickly after all.

Quarry forgotten, the first gunman turned and began firing into the dark, fearful and desperate to hit his target. Tim clawed at the ground, half-crawling, half-dragging himself in the opposite direction. There was no rational thought left in him, only fear and pain and the animalistic shrieking in his skull.

He felt each gunshot as if it hit him directly, jerking with each bang as the gunman and Hood exchanged fire. There was a final, heavy thud as the man's body hit the ground. And then silence, whole and absolute, except for Tim's ragged, gasping sobs as he scrrrrrrraped across the dirt.

Heavy, steel-toed boots landed with the weight of the grave and stomped toward Tim.

The edges of his vision curled and blackened, his world narrowing to a small pinprick of light, the pain, and the fear. He was using both hands now, or trying to. He had thought he would be brave, but there was no courage in death, not in Gotham. He couldn't breathe.

A gloved hand gripped his shoulder tightly even as a mechanical voice rasped, "Kid—"

He didn't want his last memory on this earth to be Jason Todd, Gotham's *Robin*, stomping his tibia in half.

"Don't," Tim wheezed, sobs and pain a vice around his throat, too panicked to do anything but babble one simple plea. "Please. Don't hurt me. Don't. Don't hurt me anymore. *Please*, Jason."

The hand snatched back as if burned. Tim collapsed into a limp pile of blood, bruises, and scraping bones. As the darkness flooded in from

the edges, he was grateful he wouldn't know what came next.

He wasn't awake to hear the shouts in the distance or Red Hood's answering call, letting the others know he had found their missing bird.

A place always smelled wrong after too much time neglected. No matter how carefully Jason prepared his safehouses, if he didn't cycle through them regularly, they would turn stale and musty after too long shut away. It was a discomfort he disliked, especially in a place that often came with additional discomforts, like a wound in need of field care, the wrong sheets, or a box of biscuits left to go stale.

Jason hadn't prepared this safehouse before he left. He had just left. Thrown some shit in a bag, locked the door behind him, and fled, Tim Drake's sobbing pleas still ringing in his ears. After a month away, he would have a lot of work to do, cleaning out the moldy food in his fridge, stomping roaches, and airing out that wrong, stale smell. It was work he didn't look forward to, but he considered it penance.

He still hadn't found a way to get that voice out of his head, though.

He had meant to stick around in the aftermath. Had, in fact, for the first week, long enough to make sure the kid wasn't going to keel over from a brain hemorrhage or something equally dramatic and unnecessary. Long enough for the others to chase him down, one at a time, and make awkward attempts to reach out and see if he was okay.

Like he had anything to do with anything. Like there was anything wrong. *His* bones were all intact.

Because of them, Jason had avoided this safehouse, his main one. Cassandra knew it; others might as well, and he was tired of being found. Instead, he'd moved further and further afield, to worse and worse corners, his mood worsening to match. Finally, he had fled the city entirely, telling himself that he wasn't running from those awkward attempts and his sleepless nights. His biggest lies were always to himself.

Because he shouldn't have cared, not about any of it, start to end.

He shouldn't have cared when the patrol had gone south, prickles of unease crawling between his shoulder blades like a bug wriggling down his shirt. Jason hadn't been *with* the Bats, exactly, just skulking

in the general vicinity of the shipyard to pick off anyone who got past them. It helped to have extra muscle in that corner of Gotham, and this particular gang was flooding 3D-printed weapons into Jason's streets—and not to Jason's guys, but to kids and perps and nasty little wifebeaters who wanted more permanent solutions than their fists. Jason wanted them caught as badly as anyone, so he'd been on hand, carefully kept at a distance, a chained dog held in reserve. And then the gang had flipped on a jammer, fracturing lines of communication, splintering the Bats into individual targets to be hunted.

Jason had already been on the move, ready to bust kneecaps first and ask questions later. He'd had a different angle than the rest as he came in from the west, which meant his heat scope had been the only one to catch Red Robin running for his life.

Yeah, okay, Jason had cared. He'd invested too much time, gauze, and Thai food into keeping that kid on his feet over the last year. He'd be damned if he let some two-bit, out-of-town interloper—some *tourist*—undo all that hard work.

He had been too far away to help when the kid caught a lead pipe to the arm but close enough to hear him scream. The sound had caught Jason by the throat, that strangled, high cry of a well-trained child in pain. A Robin in pain. It had squeezed him until his vision went red, then green.

It hadn't taken long to pick off the guns between him and Red Robin. For all the weapons they made, these idiots weren't very good at shooting them. Or maybe it was the fear that made their hands shake and their shots fly wide. He had had no such problem.

It had been much harder to beat back the green spreading across his vision like smog. Containing the Pit was difficult because it was strong and difficult because it was *easy*. It was so easy to let that rage buoy him above the churning waters of disgust, fear, and concern. It was *easy* to hand off the keys to the green, to let it do what needed to be done in his absence.

But he had fought it back and chosen to live in red instead of green. Let the blood spatter by his own hand, of his own will. He'd done it mostly for himself and his own pride, but also for the kid. RR and the green didn't play well together. It was a decision he'd both been grateful for and regretted a minute later.

Jason shucked off his boots, then checked the perimeter of the

safehouse for any lapses or intrusions. The expected stale smell wrinkled his nose, but he ignored it for now to focus on next steps. Once the small space was deemed secure, Jason carried his duffel into the bedroom and flipped on a purifier to begin the airing out. Next went one in the living room, the black tower whirring softly to life. It would have been far cheaper just to open some windows, but the Gotham air and the local flavor both made that the less preferable option.

It wasn't until Jason, fists full of the bundled straps of his grocery bags, entered the kitchen to begin restocking that he noticed the white square on the counter. He hadn't left it there. Alarm flexed spiny prickles down the backs of his arms until he noticed the handwriting.

Alfred's crisp, distinctive penmanship carefully annotated the small square of paper.

Come to the Manor when you see this, it read. And then, a little further down, *It's Tim.*

Jason's stomach bottomed out.

Shit. Shit!

He took an abortive step toward the door, body moving before his mind could catch up, then was hooked to a stop by his own apprehension.

The Manor. He hadn't been back to the Manor—hadn't been *inside* the Manor since…

He couldn't.

He just couldn't.

But when Jason turned back to the counter and picked up the note, he couldn't even bring himself to crumple it down into a ball to throw away. He stood, frozen, thumb brushing over the elegant peaks of the capital *M*, the slanted swoops of the *s*. He kept all of Alfred's notes, every scrap addressed to him, no matter how trivial. He didn't know why. Maybe it was the way he felt closer to the old man, knowing Alfred had thought of him while writing, or the way he could hear his voice in the letters themselves. And he could hear Alfred now, not asking but telling, despite knowing what that would mean for Jason.

Come to the Manor when you see this.

He… couldn't. Right?

But, *It's Tim,* the note had also said. And like, who fucking cared, right? It's not like they were family, or even friends. But.

Please. Don't hurt me anymore.

Jason gripped the edge of the counter and bowed his head, swearing fiercely under his breath. He kept the steady stream of curses even as he lifted his head and gathered the grocery bags into his arms. He swore as he hooked the refrigerator door open with his foot, shoved the bags inside, and slammed the door shut again. He swore as he stomped to the entryway and pulled on his boots, swore as he reholstered his weapon and hung it up, and swore out his front door, down to the street, and all the way to the Manor.

Only when the front tires of his bike hit the Manor driveway did the breathless flow of profanity cut off with a lung-flattening whoosh. Jason's fingers wrung the grips of his motorcycle, leather creaking against rubber, as he stared up at the facade. Memories layered over themselves like exposed negatives, the transparent years draped over each other. He wanted to turn and run.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't go into that house. He couldn't knock and wait to be let in, couldn't rest his palm atop the warm bronze head of Georgie sitting just inside the door, couldn't walk those halls.

What if it was nothing like he remembered?

What if it was everything like he remembered?

Jason pictured, just for a moment, standing in the foyer and looking up to see Bruce on the top landing, reading glasses balanced on the end of his nose. Staring down at him like an intruder. Or worse, staring down at him like he'd come home.

A cold sweat broke out on Jason's back and down the sides of his arms. He would have left then, without question, except the front door opened and a familiar figure stepped out.

"Master Jason," Alfred greeted him, only a hint of question in his tone, barely noticeable beneath the warmth.

Jason fished clumsily in his front jacket pocket and plucked out the card. He held it up between two fingers for Alfred to see. He didn't trust his own throat to speak.

Alfred had told him to come. He had come.

Alfred's gaze flicked from Jason's face to the card and back again, before stepping back to hold the door wide. "Come in."

His expression didn't give Jason much to go on. He looked… Well, he looked like Alfred. There were no red-rimmed eyes or other signs of distress, but Alfred was a master at hiding that sort of thing. Jason wondered if he was imagining the ripple of tension beneath the old man's facade. Yes, he would have said, if not for the card and the careful way Alfred was watching him now.

Jason dismounted and kicked out the stand for his bike. He didn't look at Alfred while he pulled off his gloves and tucked them into the seat compartment. He didn't know what to do with his hands, so he shoved them into his jean pockets before pulling them free again, then rubbed his palms against his thighs. Alfred was still waiting, so Jason stepped forward. And then stopped.

"I can't," he croaked.

He was twelve all over again, standing below the steps, staring up at this massive, sprawling estate, terrified down to his toes and trying not to show it. Except this was worse, because Jason at twelve had been afraid of all the things he didn't know but thought could hurt him, and still he had hoped. This Jason, once dead, twice alive, had no hope left, only dread coiled in his gut.

Bruce had begged him to come home, once upon a time. Alfred had invited him to family dinner every week for months. Tim had hinted and wheedled as much as he dared. And Jason had told himself that he didn't want to come back, that the past was dead and burned, but the truth was he was afraid. He was afraid of being crushed by the weight of everyone's expectations. He was afraid of stepping back into the hole he had left only to find himself unable to fit. Better to reject than be rejected. Better to be the one to kill, quick and ruthless, than to be gutted and slowly drained.

"I can't," Jason whispered again, bile and acid simmering in the back of his throat. Not even for Alfred. Not even for Tim. He had made it this far, but no further. Not in this life.

There was a weighted pause, then the quiet click of the front door closing. Jason nearly turned and fled, but the steady, soft steps of leather shoes on marble steps padded down to him. He looked up into Alfred's face, creased with understanding and sorrow. A cool, dry

palm cupped his cheek, just for a breath, then dropped.

“Come with me,” Alfred said, and turned toward the side of the house.

Jason followed, wavering in his wake like a shadow. Alfred pretended not to notice as Jason swiped a sleeve surreptitiously across his face and dragged in a ragged breath. They walked together in silence, contemplative on Alfred’s side, pensive on Jason’s. He could handle the grounds, at least. He had come here before a few different times. He didn’t know how many Alfred knew about. But this, at least, was more neutral territory, even if he fought the urge to duck every time they passed beneath a window.

It was only after they had passed the duck pond and rounded the corner to the backside of the Manor that his curiosity uncurled and dared to sniff the air. A different kind of anticipation, no less terrible, began to writhe in his gut, birthed by the unknown and Jason’s own ability to imagine things he wished he couldn’t.

It’s Tim. What did that mean? The kid had been alive when Jason had skipped town—broken, beaten, a shamble of bones in a jostled meat suit, but *fine*. Had something happened, something else? A complication? An accident? A disaster?

Jason had sat bedside at a death before. More than once, both formally and kneeling in whatever garbage the dying used for a bed in that moment. Sometimes those deaths had been his own doing. Sometimes he was merely called to witness and to bear the burden of being the one meant to stay. The number had ticked upward in his Robin days, with a sharp incline when he had returned as Red Hood, but the count had started in his childhood, long before he had even had the numbers needed to tally. It never grew any easier.

What would he do if Alfred led him to the little grave plot tucked around the side of the Manor? There were no bodies buried beneath the soil, just headstones meant to serve as memories. Bruce’s own had been there the last time Jason had snuck onto the grounds. What would it mean if that rock had been replaced with a new one, carved with a brief span of dates and a familiar name? What would it mean to have another dead Robin? Not for Bruce—*fuck* Bruce, Jason’s brain tacked on, simple habit at this point—but for Gotham. For Alfred. For Jason, the first dead Robin and the one he had meant to make the last.

That had always been the plan. He had *hated* Tim at first, his Replacement, with a hate that tasted green in his mouth even now.

But he had never intended to kill the kid, not really. Scare him. Break him. Make Bruce stop flinging children into Gotham's blood-soaked maw like cheap sacrifices to an uncaring god. But Red Hood didn't kill kids and Jason… Jason Todd couldn't kill Robin, no matter who Robin was now.

It hadn't even mattered when Tim had tacked Red onto the beginning of his name and struck out on his own. Robin was Robin. And Jason had been so angry at Tim, first for being Robin and the symbol of everything Jason was trying to burn down, and then for leaving the Manor, all those long months while Bruce was dead and the terrible weeks after he had returned. Angry and… bitterly relieved, in his own way, to watch the way the Manor had turned on Tim in Bruce's absence. Because Jason hadn't been the only one left on the outside looking in, then. And he had found it a lot harder to hate his replacement when that kid kept falling through his window like the stupidest, loneliest little fledgling to ever breathe.

They passed the little path to the headstones without slowing. Jason craned his neck to stare down the gravel length, marking the void where Bruce's stone had been, Thomas and Martha's markers left standing. No Tim. So what, then?

Where before there had been gravestones and fresh-tilled earth, Jason's imagination supplied a hospital bed and the mechanical inhale of a ventilator. His stomach turned, nausea flooding the pockets of his mouth. He had just steeled himself to break the silence and ask Alfred what to expect when their path turned sharply up the back steps to a part of the house he didn't know, a lawn-facing room with an outer wall of tall glass doors, half of them retracted to let the breeze waft inward.

Alfred climbed the steps without pausing, and Jason followed, more unsure by the moment, only to stop sharply at Alfred's snapped, "Master *Timothy*."

He saw a body first, a discarded ragdoll with broken, sprawled limbs, half-flung to the floor. It felt like a Magic Eye picture, the slow way the incomprehensible pieces had to swirl in his head before clicking into a recognizable scene. Tim sat in a chair—alive—in front of a long table. Or, "sat" was too strong a word. He was sprawled across several chairs, suspended out of the last, a casted arm knuckles against the tile floor and the other outstretched toward something on the floor lying just out of reach. At his name, he froze, eyes wide and white in a face flushed with strain.

“Oh,” Tim said, voice tight and this side of wheezing. “Hi Alfred.” The words were garbled by the object clenched between his teeth. His head tipped further to the side, one blue eye peering between too-long bangs. “Jason?”

Alfred was already moving toward Tim and, with some careful support, managed to tip the boy upright into his chair once more. Jason stepped just inside the doorway in case he was needed but otherwise hung back, confused and unsure.

“That is what the bell is for,” Alfred said, placing the wayward screwdriver Tim had been reaching for back on the table next to an old-fashioned brass bell with a *tck*. The words had crisp edges, as if whetted by repetition. A repeated argument, then.

Tim made a face. The swelling had receded and even the bruising was fading now, leaving just shadows beneath the skin, lurking for eyes that knew to look. Now upright, he pulled the peanut butter toast from between his lips and placed it back on the waiting plate.

“I did ring,” Tim protested. “You didn’t come.” His gaze kept flicking to Jason, then away.

Alfred’s lips pursed, but he allowed the conversation to transition. “You have a visitor,” he said and gestured Jason forward. Jason stepped forward automatically but was trying to figure out how best to retreat without feeling stupid even as Alfred neatly slipped toward the door on the opposite end of the room.

“I shall give you two some privacy.” Alfred paused to look back at them both, then directed at Tim, “Ring should you need anything.” And then he was gone.

Jason blinked stupidly at the backside of the door. He felt like he was struggling to come out of a strange dream, the stifling, drifting kind, halfway between fever and nightmare. Tim was fine. Alfred was gone. He was in the Manor.

He was in the Manor.

He didn’t want to look at Tim, so Jason looked around instead. He didn’t recognize this room. It wasn’t very large by Manor standards, longer than it was wide, with wood paneling on the house side and rolling glass doors facing out toward the lawn. With the doors flung open it felt… okay, being out here. Like it didn’t count as being in the Manor at all, especially with no memories bound up in the space. His

head felt a little clearer, unfogged by the subtle scent of lavender sachets and wood cleaner that he associated with the place he had once called home, so he risked a look at Tim.

Of course the kid was staring right at him. And, of course, as soon as Jason looked over, Tim looked down at his hands. Jason's stomach twisted.

He had wanted Tim to be scared of him. He had made sure of it, with fists and blades and every trick he had learned as a kid twisted into something darker and fouler. He had wanted the name of Red Hood associated with fear, with death. So much of what Red Hood had done in Gotham, Jason could barely remember. He remembered everything he did to Tim. Even when Jason had stopped nursing that particular grudge, he had felt grimly satisfied every time Tim had flinched away. That was safety, to have trust beaten out of you before it was shot out. And it was Jason's due, for everything he had done, to see fear flicker across Robin's face every time Jason got too close.

Except Tim had never stayed scared for long. Some of that was because Bruce had died and Tim, the idiot, had stopped caring whether he lived or died, as if Bruce being around had anything to do with it. He had started crawling through Jason's window. Crashing on his couch. Stealing the afghan out of the linen closet. Stocking the fridge with cans of soda and Gogurt sleeves. And in those days, when Tim went still and wary, Jason thought it was less out of fear of getting shanked and more out of fear of being told he wasn't wanted.

Please. Don't hurt me anymore.

Jason swallowed down the acid in the back of his throat. He had been so angry when he had found Tim. Not at the kid, but for him, with his busted arm and battered face. And not just at the injustice of a grown man caving in a kid's side, but at anyone doing that to *Tim.* Doing that to Tim while Jason was *right there*. Like how fucking *dare* they.

Jason had been beat down several times in his life, more than once as a kid younger than Tim, and he knew how badly that kind of thing shook a person, so he hadn't been surprised when Tim hadn't even seemed to recognize him at first. Jason had been focused on getting the kid to stop crawling on that broken arm, but when he'd reached for him, Tim had started babbling.

No, not babbling. Begging. Begging *Jason*, by name.

"Don't. Please. Don't hurt me. Don't. Don't hurt me anymore. Please,

Jason."

Maybe cognitively Jason knew Tim was too shaken, too concussed for him to take it personally. He'd told himself that even as he had recoiled from his own name pushed through swollen lips. There had been a brief moment of sickening panic that Tim thought Jason had *planned* this—the patrol, the jammer, the ambush. The panic had faded soon enough, but the nausea remained, swirling murky in his gut.

He told himself not to take it personally. He just… He had thought they were past this.

Tim's pleading had been enough to chase Jason out of Gotham entirely, the echoing sobs and the memories of older sins following him across borders and seas. The gang in Gotham truly were tourists, a new offshoot from a larger, older organization spreading gangrenous in foreign soil. Well, it would be some time before they dared set foot in Gotham again. Jason made sure of it.

And now he was back in Gotham, standing in some liminal not-Manor Manor room, looking at a Tim with no ventilator in sight but also who wouldn't look him in the eye.

At a loss, Jason let his mouth take the lead. "Why the fuck aren't you dead?"

They both cringed as soon as the words hit. Jason wanted to fling himself into the pond. Let the frogs gum him to death.

Tim had two blotchy patches of color high in his cheeks. "Uhhhh… Sorry to disappoint?"

If that was meant as a joke, it needed work.

Jason fumbled for his pocket, growling as he did, then ripped the card free and tossed it fluttering onto the table in front of Tim.

"Explain that."

Tim stared blankly, first at the card, then up at Jason. "What?"

"What what?" Jason snapped back. He pointed at the paper. "That!"

Tim reached forward with his left hand and plucked the card from the table. "Come to the Manor," he read aloud, curiously and with more

than a hint of condescension. “It’s Tim.”

His eyes flicked back up to Jason. “Yeah?”

“Why did Alfred leave me that note?” Jason asked through gritted teeth. “Why am I here?”

“Alfred didn’t leave you the note,” Tim said with a puzzled frown. “I did. Or, technically, Cass.”

Jason’s stomach shriveled to the size of a bean. If they could forge Alfred’s handwriting, he would never trust another piece of paper again.

“You’d disappeared. Cass said you weren’t in any of your usual spots, and I couldn’t, you know, check in or whatever.” Tim looked uncomfortable, though Jason suspected not for any of the reasons he *wanted* the idiot to feel discomfort. “I figured it was worth a shot.”

“That’s Alfred’s handwriting,” Jason said tightly.

“Oh. I dictated.” Tim held up his casted arm. He tapped a finger against the bottom of the note. “It did say. It’s Tim.” He wiggled his fingertips in a wave, then frowned. “Why? What did you…” A beat, and then his eyes widened.

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose until he saw spots. He really was going to kill this kid.

“Jason, I—“

Jason snapped his fingers in Tim’s direction, sharply, cutting off whatever apology was about to come stammering out. He took a breath, considered speaking. Nope, one more.

“Why did you want me to come?” Jason finally asked. *Why did you think I would come?* he wanted to ask.

Tim gave a lopsided, one-armed shrug. “I just… wanted to say thanks.”

“Thanks,” Jason repeated flatly.

“Yeah, you know, for…” Tim swallowed and rubbed his arm above his cast. “I thought… I’m glad. You know. That you were there. That you had my back.”

Sure didn't sound like it at the time.

"They've got cards for that," Jason pointed out, voice rough and tight even to his own ears. "Prewritten even."

He watched, bemused and wary, as Tim flushed.

"I, uh, wanted to know you were okay." Tim's face did something fast and complicated Jason couldn't fully decipher.

"I wasn't the one who got curb-stomped."

Or rather, he had been once, just not this time. It had ended better for Tim. Jason had made sure of it.

"No," Tim said quietly. "You were the one who left town."

Jason's mouth screwed up to say something thoughtless and mean and panicked, because that's what he did. He would cross an ocean to pistol whip a mob boss for making Tim bleed and throw up in a back alley remembering the sound of begging and leave his window unlocked and Gogurt in the fridge. But the second he got called on it, he'd blow it all up, like setting a car bomb. Pressure. Ignition. Kaboom.

Tim spoke before he could. "I figured you'd send a message yelling at me for summoning you to the Manor or something and at least someone could… check. Or something."

Jason didn't understand. He wasn't sure he wanted to, because if he did, maybe he would say whatever caustic thing was corroding his throat. And it felt… uncomfortable, like it always did when Tim *cared*, because he could tell himself that Bruce and Dick cared for the dead kid he had been, and Alfred cared because Alfred cared about everybody. Tim didn't have those reasons. But it felt nice, like a sweater that clung too tight but was warm and soft still, too.

"Well," Jason said at last. "I'm here." He held his arms out to either side, rotated them, as if to say, See? All fine, worrywart.

Tim was still studying him like Jason was a puzzle or a cause for concern, but all he said was, "Wanna help?"

Jason looked to the table where the remains of something electronic and circuit-heavy lay disemboweled on the table. He cocked his head. The new angle made it no more recognizable as anything other than

junk gadgetry.

“What am I looking at?”

Tim visibly brightened, the question all the permission he needed to wield his tiny screwdriver like a lecturer’s pointer to gesture at various pieces and parts. Jason drifted closer little by little to peer over Tim’s shoulder for a better view. Even with visuals, he didn’t understand half of it, but before he knew it, Jason found himself perched gingerly on the edge of one of the chairs at the table, positioned just right to hand along a delicately pointed tool or jeweler’s loop or to pin a microchip in place.

He forgot where he was for a little while, in this liminal not-Manor space. The breeze wafted in with the smell of grass from the lawn and the trill of bird song. He couldn’t hear the city. He couldn’t smell the scent of lemon wood polish.

The relief that had first stuttered to life in the doorway was truly starting to settle now that the bewilderment was lifting. Tim was okay. And they… they might be okay, too.

Except Tim was still cutting uncertain glances out of the corner of his eye. Jason put it down to the wariness that was his due, until Tim abruptly asked, “Is it okay? Being here?”

He kept his eyes on the circuitry as he asked, which was fine because suddenly Jason couldn’t look at him either, nor at the walls nor the closed door at the far end of the room that he had pointedly ignored. Jason looked out onto the lawn instead, squinting out at the bright, sunlit grass.

“I’m trying not to think about it,” he admitted, the honesty hardwon as he shifted in his seat.

“Oh.”

The slight hesitation was the only warning Jason got before Tim added in a rush, “No one’s home right now, except Alfred. If you wanted to go i—”

“*No*.” The word swung out explosive like a fist. Maybe it hit Tim, but Jason was the one left suckerpunched.

Tim waited as the swamping tides of longing receded, attention on his work as if Jason hadn’t been left beached and gasping in the chair

beside him. Only when the tension in the air eased ever so slightly did he say, as if this had been the point all along, “I didn’t tell Alfred where to find you.”

Jason blinked. He hadn’t had time to consider the *how* of the note. He had just assumed Alfred was Alfred.

“Cass left the note for me. I figured, since she’s already been there, it was fine.” Tim phrased it as a statement, but the very end threatened to tip upward. Jason only grunted. He didn’t mind if Alfred knew where his safehouses were, probably. Alfred was Alfred. And Cass did know.

“Dick and Damian are in Bludhaven while I’m here.” Tim’s tone didn’t change, as if one thought led naturally into the next. “And Bruce, he’s got stuff. I mean, there are meetings at WE, or ribbon cutting ceremonies, or whatever. And business lunches with Clark and stuff. Alfred keeps his calendar.”

Jason had no idea where this was going.

“I don’t get the boot off for another two weeks.” Tim had been poking at his circuits while speaking, risking only a glance or two up to gauge Jason’s reaction, but now he kept his gaze fixed strictly downward as he finished haltingly, “Maybe you could come back again? Just to here, or maybe outside? I sit out on the bench sometimes.”

The tips of his ears were turning a luminescent shade of pink. Tim didn’t ask for things. Tim just *did*. He crawled through windows, stole blankets, stocked the fridge, and joined Red Hood on patrol at random. He pushed and nudged and elbowed his way in to where he wanted to be, without pause or question, because if he paused, he might be told *no*. But now he was asking. Because his leg was in a boot and his arm was in a cast, and, for no reason Jason could explain, seeing Jason mattered to him. But he needed Jason to be the one to do the doing.

Jason looked out across the lawn again. He knew the view from other vantages, higher windows and broader planes. From this angle, it was just grass and trees, the landscape familiar in a vague way but nothing notable. Nothing like home.

He hadn’t anticipated a world in which he would be back here again. Hadn’t anticipated sitting across from Tim—Robin, his replacement, his enemy—as Alfred worked unseen in hidden rooms. But then, he hadn’t anticipated a world in which he would care about shared

containers of pad thai. When he breathed, Jason could still feel the rustle of panic beneath his ribs, stirring deeper waters of guilt and shame and regret.

Jason pushed himself to his feet. “I should go.”

Tim had gone still, shoulders tucked in but face blank, the expected rejection taken stoically. Then he flinched in surprise as Jason leaned over and flicked the side of his head. “Ow!”

“I didn’t even get to unpack. Have Cass write the note next time,” Jason complained, and was pleased to see wary surprise reanimate Tim’s face.

“Cass can’t write,” Tim pointed out. “She has a tutor.”

“Use your other hand then, I don’t care.” Jason shoved his hands into his pockets and strode toward the door, stopping just outside the threshold to twist and look back at Tim. “Alfred keeps the schedule?”

Tim nodded, then added a rushed “Yeah. Yes. He does,” for good measure.

Jason chewed the inside of his lip, then nodded. No promises. He didn’t do promises. And he remembered everything he had done to Tim. But he remembered everything Tim had done for him, too.

“Tell Alfred I want blueberry muffins next time,” Jason said at last, then added over his shoulder as he hurried down the steps, “And the good tea!”

“Tell him yourself!” Tim shot back.

Jason flipped a middle finger over his shoulder. The sound of Tim’s laughter followed him down the path.

It’s not like they were friends. Except when they were.

End Notes

Gifted to Stamp because their fic "Unshaken" has a scene where Jason accidentally makes Tim have a panic attack and my brain levitated to attention. (Also, it's a very good fic so far.) I didn't end up replicating that scene or anything, but the germinated idea needed to be honored.

Also, the gunman is speaking words from Google Translate, I make no claims to accuracy.

ETA: Many thanks to dreadazesia for offering a more accurate Serbian translation! The fic has been updated to reflect this new information.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!